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Foreign
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Iran: Fragmentation in the Future?

An Intelligence Memorandum

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Iran:
Fragmentation in the Future? ☐

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Summary

The Iran-Iraq conflict could lead to the partition of Iran. Iraq is considering establishing an Arab entity in the area of Khuzestan Province. If Iranian forces become unable to control key points in other border provinces inhabited by ethnic minorities, autonomous areas or ministates could evolve there. Some minority leaders, however, would be tempted by Tehran's weakness to try to replace the Khomeini regime rather than force the federalization or dismemberment of Iran.

Significant deterioration of Tehran's already limited control of the Iranian periphery would affect the interests of the USSR, Iraq, Turkey, and Pakistan, who are deeply concerned about the balance of political forces in Iran. The other states worry particularly about Soviet exploitation of Iranian political instability and Moscow's influence among minorities whose homelands extend into their own territory.

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This memorandum was prepared by ☐ Southwest Asia Analytic Center, and ☐ USSR-EE Division, Office of Political Analysis. It was coordinated with the National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia and the Office of Geographic and Societal Research. Information available as of 30 September 1980 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and should be directed to the Chief, Southwest Asia Analytic Center, OPA, on ☐

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**Iran:
Fragmentation in the Future?**

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Iran was no longer a centralized state when the conflict with Iraq erupted in late September. In the 19 months since the fall of the Shah's government, the Khomeini regime has not firmly controlled the border provinces occupied by ethnic minorities dissatisfied with central government policies. The political objectives of the various minority peoples vary substantially.

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The *Kurds* in the northwest have a long history of dissidence. The well-armed Kurds were able quickly to assert control over much of their area after the collapse of the monarchy. They have extended their control despite military campaigns that have forced them from the towns into the hills. Even before the outbreak of war, Iraqi incursions into Iranian Kurdish territory were further limiting Tehran's ability to hold the dissidents in check. The major Kurdish dissident groups—leftists of various persuasions—have ties to the USSR and have been receiving some aid from Iraq. They have sought autonomy, not independence.

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The *Azarbayjanis*, Iran's largest minority, are well integrated into Iranian society. Their loyalty to Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, whose moderate positions contrast with Khomeini's, and the traditional strength of leftist groups in the far north have prevented pro-Khomeini forces from consolidating control in their homeland. Unlike most other major ethnic groups, the Azarbayjanis have been in peaceful opposition, with the exception of the short-lived disturbances, mainly in Tabriz, in late 1979 and early 1980.

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The *Turkomans* along the Caspian coast have clashed repeatedly with government forces and seem to have won considerable autonomy. Their leaders may have well developed contacts across the Soviet border, but have not been pressing for independence.

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The *Baluchis* in the southeast appear to have won autonomy similar to that of the Kurds, but with less violence, possibly because of the isolation of the province. Some Baluchi dissidents have contacts with the USSR and Iraq as well as with Baluchi dissidents in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Reports conflict on whether the strongest groups want autonomy or independence and on their attitude toward the USSR.

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Arab dissidence largely ended in mid-1979 when the Khomeini regime put the aged Arab spiritual leader Ayatollah Khaqani under house arrest in Qom. Under the administration of former provincial Governor-General

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Madani, the Arabs were crushed. Most of the subsequent terrorist incidents in their homeland were probably carried out by Iraqi agents or radical Iranian leftists. When active, the major Arab dissident groups pressed for local autonomy in terms similar to that demanded by the Kurds. Some radical Arab leaders have called for independence. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] presumably to discuss a possible role in an Iraqi-backed local regime. The Iraqis have broadcast statements of support allegedly sent by anti-Khomeini Arab leaders and groups in southwestern Iran. [REDACTED]

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The *Qashqais* of south central Iran tried to work within the new Islamic system, but in the past few months their leaders realized that the Khomeini regime intended to eliminate tribal chiefs who have emerged as local leaders. Qashqai leaders have been able to keep most government forces out of their homeland, and the tribe has remained peaceful except when one of their leaders was arrested for a short time in mid-1980. The Qashqais have been arming, but—like the Azarbayjanis—they want to overthrow Khomeini rather than break away from central control. [REDACTED]

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The Fragmentation of Iran



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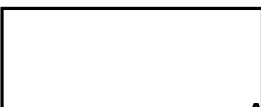
Iraqi encouragement of the exiles and Arab dissidents could cause further centrifugal movement in other parts of Iran, especially if the conflict with Iraq weakens the Iranian Government's armed forces seriously enough that Tehran cannot retain control at least of the major towns and road and rail links in outlying provinces. [REDACTED]

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Fragmentation could occur in different ways in the border provinces; the following distinctions are intended to indicate general patterns of such a development:

- De facto federalization. Local leaders in one or more areas assume control but do not proclaim independence; weakness forces Tehran to acquiesce.

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- De jure federalization. Local leaders formally announce establishment of regional autonomy and compel Tehran to agree officially.
- Disintegration. Leaders in one or more areas declare independence with or without foreign backing; or foreign forces move into border areas to forestall consolidation of control by local Iranian leaders.

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Incentives and Constraints

The Iran-Iraq conflict may lift some of the constraints that have influenced local leaders to seek sectarian equality under the constitution and local autonomy rather than independence:

- If oil revenues are unavailable to the Tehran regime, minorities will not look to the central regime for local investment and subsidies.
- If the armed forces, especially the airborne units, are substantially weakened, the balance of power between dissident and government forces will shift in the minorities' favor, at least for the short term.
- Foreign governments may offer attractive aid.

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Important constraints would remain. If they came to depend on foreign backing, local leaders would run the risk of serving the interests of their patrons rather than their own. Without such backing, their homelands would be fair game whenever the central government managed to regroup its armed forces. If more than one area seceded, cooperation among their disparate populations would not be likely, and the central government might be able to move against them one by one. Even if it succeeded, however, Tehran would still need substantial military resources to garrison the regions that were retaken.

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Most minority leaders could not easily dominate autonomous or independent administrations. Rival political forces would have to be put down, and territorial disagreements with other ethnic groups would have to be settled by force. The people's hopes for an end to fighting and improvements in their standard of living would have to be postponed.

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Azərbayjanis, Qashqais, and others would take advantage of significant weakness in Tehran, not to establish self-government, but to topple the Khomeini regime and set up a more moderate government. Qashqai leaders

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Radical leftist groups—mujahedin and fedayeen, who have been active among the minorities but have no territorial base of their own—support increased local autonomy in a constitutional framework, but would not necessarily support independence or formal autonomy for their ethnic allies.

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Foreign Attitudes

The Soviets probably would view the establishment of local ethnic regimes within Iran as the first step toward Iran's disintegration along ethnic lines. They probably would be ambivalent about such a course of events.

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Fragmentation would enable the USSR to work for pro-Soviet, stable regimes on its southern border as well as in other regions of Iran. It already has assets in many areas, some of which could play a leading role in local governments. Control of Kurdish, Azarbayjani, and Turkoman regions probably would be Moscow's first concern. Soviet ties to leftist elements in each of these areas would facilitate Soviet efforts to promote pro-Soviet regimes there.

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A pro-Soviet regime in Baluchistan, which would be more difficult to achieve, would give the Soviets access to port facilities on the Arabian Sea, put them in a position to oversee oil routes in the Persian Gulf, and enable them to increase pressure on Pakistan. Control of Iranian borders with Afghanistan would help the Soviets close off avenues of support for the Afghan insurgents.

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Moreover, the weakening of central authority in Tehran might curtail the aggressive, proselytizing compulsions of the current regime. It would also preempt US efforts to reestablish its influence and presence in a strong nation on the USSR's border.

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In spite of these apparent incentives, there would be many disadvantages. The Soviets have no guarantee short of military intervention that their assets would prevail in key regions or that the new political entities would prove sympathetic to their interests. These new regimes might be eager to prevent Soviet domination and might turn instead to Iraq or the West. Moreover, Moscow would not win the main prize—Khuzestan—unless it could quickly install in Tehran a leftist government strong enough to retake the oilfields. Assuming an Iraqi-dominated or affiliated Khuzestan, Soviet ability to use relations with any of Iran's other ethnic regions would not help the USSR's and East Europe's efforts to gain access to oil.

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Iraq's claims to dominance in the Gulf would also be strongly reinforced by Iran's decline. The Soviets might find themselves facing a strong regional power determined to prevent superpower activity in the region. The existence of two roughly equivalent powers, preoccupied with each other, better serves Soviet interests.

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The USSR's concern about possible US exploitation of instability in Iran appears genuine; fragmentation and the creation of additional ambiguities might add to this concern. [REDACTED]

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The disadvantages of Iran's disintegration appear to be more significant than the benefits and suggest that the Soviets are unlikely to promote fragmentation actively. Should mounting pressures on Iran set in train a process leading toward disintegration, however, the Soviets would almost certainly seek to minimize the negative impact and reap the greatest possible advantage:

- They would seek to ensure that the newly formed neighboring entities were pro-Soviet, using their own contacts and assets within the various regions and establishing formal and supportive links to those in power.
- They would try to strengthen their ties to Baghdad and try to forestall the possibility that a more powerful Iraq might turn toward the West.
- They would seek to maintain ties to the rump government in Tehran, whatever its persuasion, to protect their remaining assets within Iran and prevent the restoration of US influence. Moscow would not back that government in a revanchist war against Iraq so long as the latter controlled the Gulf.
- The possibility of Soviet military intervention, either to stabilize areas along its own borders or to assist a weak, leftist regime in Tehran, would increase significantly. Moscow's assessment of the probable US response to such a move would be a major consideration, and the Soviets might calculate that the United States would be unlikely to protect an oil-deficient Iran. [REDACTED]

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Pakistan and Turkey

The governments of Pakistan and Turkey would regard the fragmentation of Iran as a catastrophe with grave consequences for their own security because of possible exploitation of the situation by the USSR and by autonomy-minded ethnic minorities. Both would try to forestall Iran's disintegration and would support the installation of an effective, moderate central government free of Soviet influence. [REDACTED]

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The joint agreement assumes at least a minimal ability or willingness on the part of Iranian forces in the southeast to resist an enemy. If Iran were to fragment soon, the immediate enemy would be the local Baluchi leaders, and the military units still in the province might not be willing or able to oppose them on behalf of the Khomeini regime. Pakistan would react with dismay to a Baluchi declaration of autonomy or independence. It would probably move quickly to close its border with Iran and might seize Zahedan—the provincial capital through which the main road and rail links to Pakistan run—and the airbase and port at Chah Bahar to preempt the consolidation of a Baluchi entity. [REDACTED]

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